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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 HO CHI MINH CITY 000572

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR EAP/BCLTV, INR/B  
USDOC FOR 3132 USFCS/OIO EAP/A. BACHER

E. O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: NEWEST HCMC VICE CHAIRMAN: BAD HABITS TO BLAME FOR  
TRAFFIC, SEWAGE, LAND USE PROBLEMS

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SUMMARY  
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1. (SBU) HCMC People's Committee's newest Vice Chairman, Nguyen Van Dua, discussed urban planning and quality of life issues with Consul General in an initial courtesy call on June 11. Vice Chairman Dua focused on HCMC's serious waste management, land use and traffic issues, and its efforts to attract investment for municipal projects. He also discussed ideas for vocational training and policies regarding construction and urban development.

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NO ONE WANTS TO TOUCH IT: SEWAGE AND WASTE DISPOSAL  
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2. (SBU) The Consul General paid a courtesy call on Mr. Nguyen Van Dua, the newest of the HCMC People's Committee's five vice-chairmen, on June 11. The 45-minute discussion focused on urban planning and quality of life in HCMC, as well as waste management, vocational training, and investment efforts. According to the Mr. Dua (hard D), the municipal authorities are deeply concerned about current inadequate methods for dealing with the large amounts of waste produced daily. Waste management problems are exacerbated by leaks in antiquated water and sewage pipes. While local and Dutch scientists were working to address the waste issue, they had yet to find solutions. HCMC needed a more comprehensive approach, to include use of new technologies for landfill, composting, and waste-to-energy conversion.

3. (SBU) Asked why he thought foreign investors had yet to express real interest in waste management projects, Vice Chairman Dua blamed delays in land planning for disposal sites and poor management practices. In the past, civil servants had focused on questionable sites, failing to take into consideration the impact of drive time, environmental hazards, and other factors. The HCMC government was making adjustments, but the impact had yet to be felt. While one investor group had developed a plan to process waste into energy, the costs were too high. HCMC still needs modern waste disposal technology -- but at an affordable cost.

4. (SBU) According to Mr. Dua, HCMC is studying new ideas for managing waste, including the use of city waterways, rather than roads, for transportation. At the same time, the government is working to raise awareness and encourage sorting and classification of trash at the household level.

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BETTER MANAGEMENT THROUGH VOCATIONAL TRAINING  
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5. (SBU) Vice Chairman Dua noted the importance of improved and expanded vocational training to raise the quality of the workforce. Only 30 percent of the labor pool has professional skills at present, but HCMC hopes to raise that figure to 40 percent in the near future. The Vice Chairman expressed interest in working with San Francisco, within the framework of the Sister City relationship, to meet training needs. In particular, he emphasized the importance of training line supervisors to organize and manage their workers.

6. (SBU) Asked to choose between joint-venture, general use vocational schools throughout the city, or more specialized vocational schools to supply existing industrial parks, Vice Chairman Dua saw value in both -- one for improving the labor pool at large, the other for meeting specific labor needs. He looked forward to discussing appropriate sectors with any interested investor with sufficient capital. He also cited HCMC's need for a detailed analysis of labor supply and demand.

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HCMC'S FAMOUS TRAFFIC CHAOS ON THE DECLINE?  
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7. (SBU) Despite signs of improvement in dealing with HCMC's "famous" traffic problem, Vice Chairman Dua was not satisfied that sufficient progress had been made. Traffic deaths and injuries are reportedly down 30 percent compared to last year, but the city government wants to reduce accidents to the lowest level possible.

The Vice Chairman stressed that easing traffic flow and making travel within the city safer and more convenient was essential to improving quality of life for visitors and residents alike. Public transport is a top priority, and the city is looking at ways to convince people to take advantage of existing options. Buses are currently the primary means of transport, but city planners are examining other options. Vice Chairman Dua asked the CG to encourage American companies to participate in transportation projects and expressed his eagerness to accept recommendations for technical assistance and investment from the U.S.

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URBAN PLANNING NIGHTMARES  
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18. (SBU) Turning to other large infrastructure and construction projects, Vice Chairman Dua noted his disappointment with the Saigon South development, citing the modest number of projects underway in the relatively large (2600 hectare) area. He had high praise, however, for the Thu Thiem New Urban Area Project (which he managed just prior to his promotion in February of this year). HCMC is soliciting anonymous design proposals and bringing in a jury of international architects to help select the optimal design. (Note: Results for the Thu Thiem development project should be announced o/a July 10, 2003.) Mr. Dua said he expected bidding packages to go out in October, and encouraged American participation at every stage. Construction on a new East-West highway is expected to begin in November, and general upgrades are planned for the downtown business district.

19. (SBU) Calling the Vietnamese mindset a "disaster" for urban planning, the Vice Chairman blamed many of the city's housing problems on the poor quality of existing residential options. Given the choice, most people preferred to live in their own houses rather than apartments, leading to a constant effort to out-build one another. From Mr. Dua's point of view, the new construction is not only of dubious quality, but the architectural designs are "ugly." While better apartment quality would certainly help, any real improvement would require a fundamental change in attitude. There is district-level authority to approve most residential construction, but illegal buying and selling of land is difficult to control, as is building without a permit.

110. (SBU) Vice Chairman Dua stressed the need to change the mindset and behavior of HCMC's population in order to deal more responsibly with both urban planning and waste management issues. He said 2003 had been declared the "Year of Restoring Order in Public Life," during which time efforts would be made to change attitudes on littering, driving, construction, and other urban issues. He remarked that the SEAGAMES (Southeast Asia Games) competition to be hosted by Vietnam in December 2003 might provide an opportunity for the HCMC government to launch public sanitation and anti-litter campaigns.

111. (SBU) Asked to estimate the actual population of HCMC (some official publications still list the figure as 6 million), Vice Chairman Dua pointed to the large number of temporary residents and the huge migratory influx of job-seekers from the provinces as complicating an accurate count. Describing the need to better manage the division of labor between HCMC and neighboring provinces, he hoped HCMC could move toward attracting a more highly skilled, white-collar workforce to stabilize the population. When pressed, he did not contradict a population estimate of "more than 8 million."

112. (SBU) Vice Chairman Dua asked the CG for her "frank observations" on the current state of the relationship between city government and the population it served. Noting that ConGen staff were generally quite pleased to call HCMC home, she cited police responsiveness as one specific area for improvement.

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STRENGTHENING THE SISTERHOOD  
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113. (SBU) Vice Chairman Dua asked the CG to recommend specific areas for cooperation with HCMC's Sister City in the U.S. Noting San Francisco's reputation as being progressive and open-minded, she recommended pursuing cultural and educational exchanges, mass transit projects, fire prevention and safety training, vocational training, and environmental improvement programs. She also mentioned that Chief Mario Trevino of the San Francisco Fire Department hoped to visit Hanoi and HCMC in August to participate in a jointly-organized Fire Prevention and Safety Conference.

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LOCAL BOY MAKES GOOD  
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114. (SBU) Vice Chairman Dua assumed his new position as one of HCMC's five Vice Chairmen in February 2003. His portfolio includes transportation, public works, land administration, construction, and urban management. He served previously on the Project Management Board for the Thu Thiem New Urban Area for one year, and as Secretary of the HCMC District 3 Party Committee for

five years before that. He was Secretary of the HCMC Youth Union, a traditional stepping-stone to prominence in city and national politics, during 1992-1996. Vice Chairman Dua holds an advanced degree in politics, and bachelor's degrees in economics and law. He understands/speaks some English.

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COMMENT  
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115. (SBU) ConGen first requested this initial courtesy call more than two months ago, after Vice Chairman Dua indicated his interest in meeting after a serendipitous encounter with the CG at a representational event. However, when we requested an appointment, we were told that the new Vice Chairman was "not ready", as he was still getting acquainted with his portfolio. Having now seen Mr. Dua in action, it is clear he is comfortable with his new responsibilities and willing to speak openly with USG officials. Our External Relations Office contacts say he has already earned a reputation as a hard worker (in the office by 7:00 a.m., does not leave until after 9:00 p.m.), and is more "openly emotional."

116. (SBU) Vice hairman Dua was confident and engaged throughout the meeting, asking as many questions as he answered. His requests for feedback and criticism from the CG were bold and unusual in a first meeting in the Vietnamese context. This may indicate that the powers-that-be continue to recognize the importance of assigning outward-looking non-ideologues to administer Vietnam's dynamic economic engine. That said, HCMC covers a huge metropolitan area, with many of the same pluses and minuses of developing world cities anywhere. Given budget realities and varying levels of central government control, it would be unrealistic to expect that even the most enlightened city officials could solve such massive infrastructure and public service problems anytime soon.  
YAMAUCHI